Converting Candidates

How to attract and manage a roster of candidates through your recruitment process

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Introduction

The aim of this guide is to provide an overview of how to craft a recruitment process that will maximize your chances of attracting the strongest candidates in the market.

A strong recruitment process requires lots of elements to be designed and executed well, and this guide will provide a detailed overview of how design and execute a strong recruitment process in order to maximize candidate attraction.

Our separate Interview Techniques guide provides a detailed view of different interview techniques that can be used to effectively assess candidates.

This guide will focus on candidate attraction from the earliest stages of a recruitment process to negotiating an offer with the successful candidate.

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About NEON RIVER

Neon River is a headhunting firm that specializes in working with internet, software, games and broader technology companies across Europe.

We hire leaders across all key functions.

Internet

🎧 Streaming   📱 Online Retail   ✈ Travel

⇄ Marketplaces   🪙 Fintech   📖 E-Learning

💼 IT Services   📁 Open Source

🕸 SaaS   📈 Digital Transformation

Software

Games

🎮 Console and PC   🎲 Online Gambling   📱 Mobile and Free-to-play

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The importance of job descriptions

A well written job description can play just as important a role as a verbal pitch in converting candidates. It tells a compelling story about the business, the product / proposition, the market, management team, the role and why it is important and interesting.

Unfortunately, 95%+ of job descriptions you see in the market fail to tell a compelling story about the business and the role in question. A standardized two or three paragraph copy-and-paste is provided as a company introduction, followed by generic bullet points about the role responsibilities and requirements.

Candidates need to buy into the company and role proposition before they can become seriously interested in your role. Are your job descriptions badly under-selling your business and the job opportunity?

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Analysing a standard job description

Many typical job descriptions don't do a good job of selling a company and role to candidates.

Job title: Chief Marketing Officer (CMO)

> A generic copy-and-paste company description that is far too short and doesn't explain why InnovaCore Games is a desirable company to work for.

Company Overview
InnovaCore Games is a leading mobile game publisher dedicated to creating immersive gaming experiences for players worldwide. With a team of passionate developers, designers, and artists, we strive to push the boundaries of mobile gaming and deliver high-quality, visually stunning, and innovative games.

Job Overview
We are seeking a highly skilled and strategic Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) to lead our marketing efforts and drive the growth and brand visibility of our company. The CMO will be responsible for developing and implementing comprehensive marketing strategies, managing the marketing team, and overseeing all marketing activities.

> The role responsibilities feel generic, and don't make the role seem dynamic or exciting

Responsibilities
- Develop and execute the overall marketing strategy to drive business growth, increase brand awareness, and achieve market leadership.
- Identify target markets, customer segments, and competitive landscape to effectively position the company's products/services.
- Lead the marketing team, providing guidance, support, and mentorship to achieve departmental objectives.

> No-one is ever hired because they have "x years of experience". It's better to frame requirements in terms of specific skills and responsibilities

Requirements
- More than 10 years of experience working in marketing
- More than 4 years of experience in a senior leadership role
- …..

Writing a job description: Best practice

When we write a job description, we have two main objectives;

1. Informing candidates about the company, market, role responsibility and requirements

2. Shaping a narrative around the company, role and market that is effective in converting candidates.

Tips

- It's generally better to use PowerPoint rather than Word. Use images to make your document visually appealing. 8 to 12 slides should give you enough room to shape a compelling narrative around the company, market and role.

- It makes sense to start writing about the company and product / market before moving on to the role requirements.

- Explain why the role is an important hire – having influence is always attractive to candidates.

- Use facts and statistics where you can in order to show success or market opportunities.

- Spend time on making the product proposition seem as interesting as possible – what important problems does it solve?

- When you write the role requirements and responsibilities, make sure they make the role seem important and dynamic.

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A Sample Introduction

Maritime Software Inc (MSI) is one of the world's leading providers of insight, data and analytics products and services to the global maritime industry. Over 40,000 maritime professionals use MSI technology to help drive operational efficiency, compliance and manage risk.

In 2021, Maritime Software Inc was acquired by leading private equity firm Golden Lake Partners at a valuation of £925m. The company is growing rapidly and is highly profitable.

We are looking to hire a Chief Product Officer to help drive further innovation and growth across the business.

This document will provide background on Maritime Software Inc, the Chief Product Officer role, and the skills and experiences we are looking for in the successful candidate.

An Introduction provides the perfect opportunity to set the scene and start shaping your narrative around the role and business.
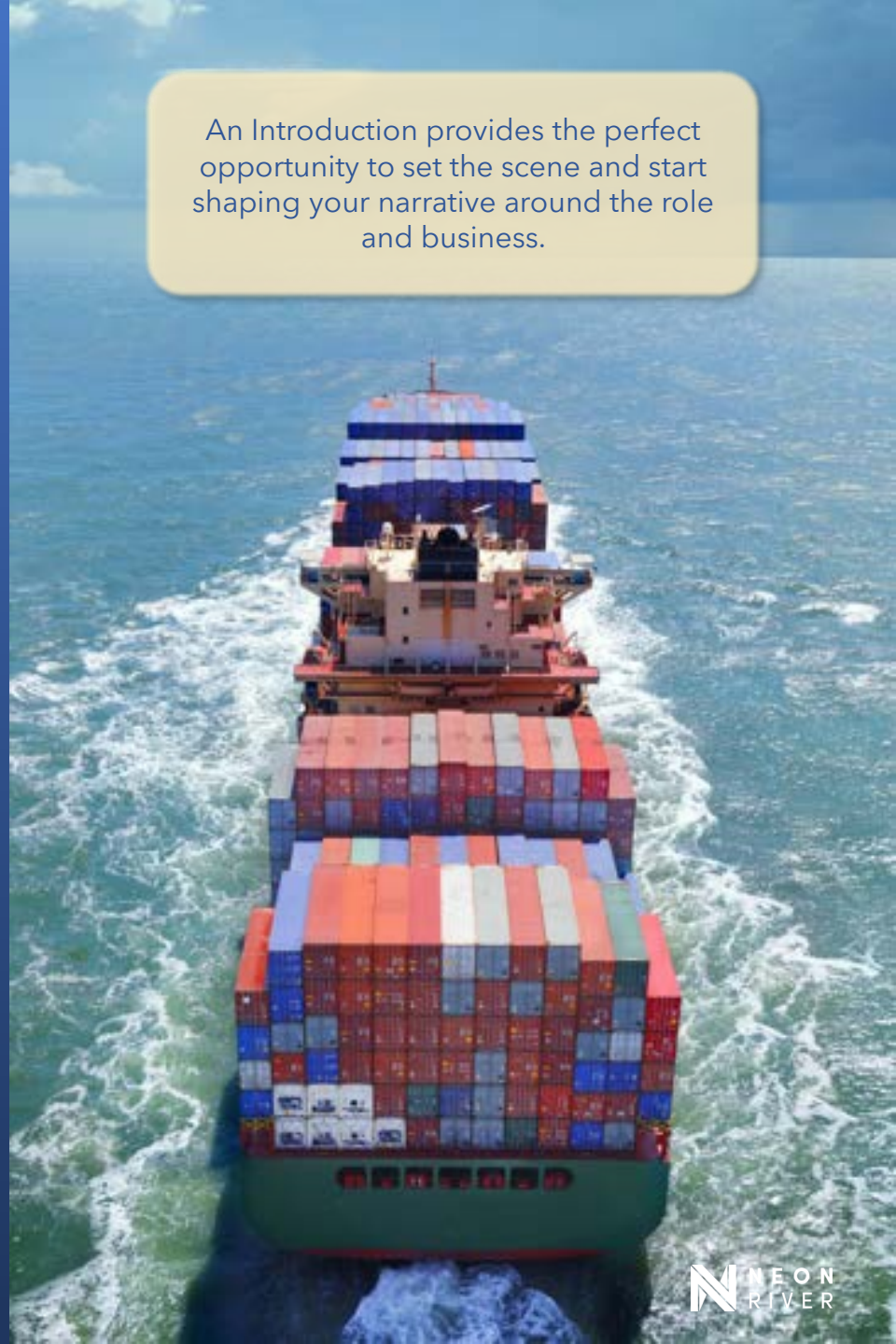
The Maritime Industry in numbers

Industry statistics help to illustrate the size of the market opportunity.

Imagery helps to make the description more visually interesting and feel less verbose.

Between 2011 and 2021, 892 vessels were lost at sea

Between 1990 and 2020, the volume of goods transported by sea doubled

80 to 90 percent of world trade relies on trade finance

Between 2013 and 2020 the capacity of the global merchant fleet increased by 37%

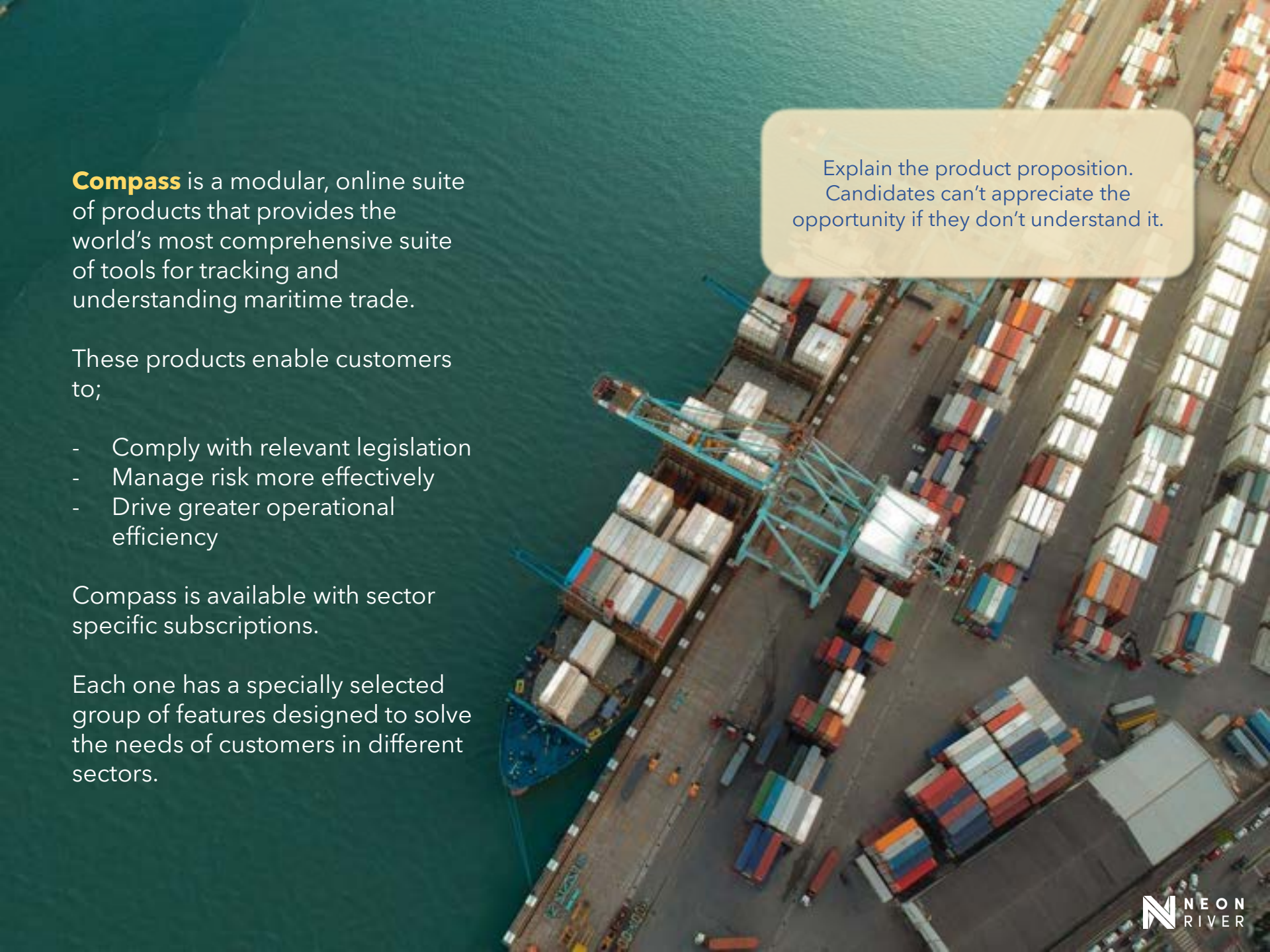About 58,000 merchant ships trade internationally each year

In 2021 10.99 billion tons of goods were transported by sea

On average, each person in the world consumes about 1.5 tons of shipped goods each year

It is estimated that 80% of global goods are transported by sea

In 2021, there were 132 pirate attacks on ships

Global shipping lines made an operating profit of over $110bn in 2021

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Compass is a modular, online suite of products that provides the world's most comprehensive suite of tools for tracking and understanding maritime trade.

These products enable customers to;

- Comply with relevant legislation
- Manage risk more effectively
- Drive greater operational efficiency

Compass is available with sector specific subscriptions.

Each one has a specially selected group of features designed to solve the needs of customers in different sectors.

Explain the product proposition. Candidates can't appreciate the opportunity if they don't understand it.

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CPO **Example Role Description**

 Responsibilities

- Lead the product management and design organizations, providing your team with direction, coaching and guidance.
- Grow the product management and design teams in line with the business, ensuring that new hires are of high quality and a good fit with company objectives.
- Shape the product strategy for Maritime Software Inc iterating current products and creating new products and features that delight customers and drive revenue growth.
- Spend time with customers to understand their needs and inform the product strategy.
- Ensure that products and features are shipped on time, on budget and to a high standard.
- Define the right tools and methodologies to be used across the product management and design organizations.
- Help to drive the transition from a waterfall to an agile development environment.
- Be the outward facing leader of the product organization. Provide thought leadership within the maritime technology industry at events and conferences.

This role reports to Brian Johnson, CEO Maritime Software Inc . The location is flexible – but the candidate will need to spend time at the headquarters, located at 31 Charing Cross Road.

Brian Johnson CEO Maritime Software Inc   in

- Deep experience of working with maritime technology products
- Formerly CEO of Navisoft, a PE backed maritime software business acquired by KKR for $2bn
- Deep experience of working with data services having previously spent 10 years with Thomson Reuters

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Chief Product Officer **Requirements**

Product Management Expert
You will be an experienced product management leader, who provides strong leadership, coaching and development to your teams.

Industry Experience
You will likely have experience of working with data related software products or services. Experience of working with maritime technology would be an advantage, but is not essential.

Agile Development
You will have deep experience of agile development methodologies.

Entrepreneurial
You enjoy working in a fast-paced, entrepreneurial business.

Communication
You will have strong verbal and written communication skills.

Driving operational excellence
You will be a strong operator, ensuring projects are completed on time and on budget.

Product Strategy
You will be able to help shape the product strategy as an important member of the leadership team.

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Approaching candidates on email or LinkedIn

The content of email and LinkedIn messages you send to candidates can have a profound effect on candidate conversion.

Tips

❑ Provide enough details to pique candidates' interest and enable them to qualify the opportunity at a high level but don't go into too much detail – a hint of mystique makes them want to know more about the role

❑ Use helpful statistics where you can to help make the role / company seem important and successful – e.g. revenues, team size, funds raised, growth rates etc.

❑ Personalise your message as much as possible. It can make a huge difference to candidate conversion. Can you leverage any mutual industry connections for example?

❑ Don't be verbose – writing less sometimes comes across as more confident. Great roles don't need a hard sell.

❑ Try to make the product proposition sound as attractive as possible – it's a key factor for most candidates. How do you make it seem really interesting?

An example introductory message

Working for a PE backed company is attractive to many candidates

"Given your extensive experience in the sector" helps to personalize the message

The £925m investment is a helpful statistic we can leverage

Hi Gary,

I hope you are well. I'm currently helping a PE backed software business to recruit a Chief Product Officer, and I'm keen to speak with you about it to see if either it might interest you directly or perhaps you might know the perfect candidate.

Our client is a maritime software company that has recently been acquired by a leading PE firm for £925m. Given your extensive experience in the sector I thought you'd be a great person to talk to about this.

Is there a good time when we could have a brief introductory conversation about this?

Best Regards,

A Recruiter

It often makes sense to keep it open as to whether they might be interested themselves or refer others

This note has a good balance of being specific but still leaving some mystique around the opportunity

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Discussing compensation with candidates

There are some risks when discussing role compensation early in the process with candidates:

"What is the compensation for the role?"

Be very careful about openly sharing salary ranges on email or LinkedIn with candidates, particularly if you don't know their compensation today. Candidates might assume they are entitled to the maximum amount you mentioned, regardless of whether that's appropriate to their level or not. This could lead to a rejected offer, which is your fault for mis-setting expectations.

Sometimes you have to show some indication of compensation in order to engage the candidate. In this scenario, make sure any figures you do mention are cloaked in caveats. For example. "*It will really depend on candidate experience, and it's very early in the process and not for me to decide, but a lot of the candidates we're talking are often earning roughly X to Y in their roles today*".

Tips

❑ Only share as much about compensation levels on the role as you have to

❑ If you do have to share compensation information – make sure emphasize that it's early in the process and any offer will be bespoke for an individual candidate

❑ You can also ask the candidate how much they are paid today in the role, to get a sense of their seniority before answering.

Pitching roles to candidates: Preparation

Assuming you have reached out to candidates via email or LinkedIn, the next step is a verbal pitch either on the phone or via videoconference. Describing roles to candidates over the phone is a great way to really make them come to life.

Before the call

- Research the background of the candidate so you can tailor your pitch (and small talk) accordingly.
- See if you have some sort of personal connection to them – perhaps a candidate you placed that they know or a friendly industry contact. This can help to "break the ice" and give you credibility.
- Make an informed guess about whether they are a potential candidate (they could be interested themselves) or whether they are more likely to be able to refer others.

Sources

Some candidates aren't likely to be interested in the role themselves, but could be a good person to ask for referrals due to their functional or industry experience.

Within headhunting firms, this type of candidate is often called a **source**.

If you are approaching a source, looking for referrals, keep your pitch short and relatively focussed around the role requirements. Make sure you are grateful for their assistance, and if they do recommend others, ask them if it's OK to share their name as the referrer when you approach the candidate/s they recommend. It might also be a good idea to ask them for contact details for their recommendations, if they have them.

Pitching roles to candidates: **The call**

Every recruiter is different, and there is no one right way to pitch a role to a candidate. However, having a framework can be helpful, particularly if you don't have that much experience of pitching roles to candidates.

Objectives

To provide the candidate with a high quality, informative overview of the company and role, which garners their interest as a potential candidate.

Format

- Introduction and small talk
- A 2-4 minute initial overview of the role
- Answering any questions they might have

At the start of the call

- Make sure you're talking to the right person if they haven't identified themselves, particularly if calling their mobile. It could be a colleague picking up their phone!

- Introduce yourself briefly, and explain the purpose of the call. When doing this, it's often a good idea to keep it open as to whether the person you're talking to might be a candidate or a "source" themselves. Something along the lines of, "*I'm keen to speak with you about this project to see if either it might interest you personally or if you might be able to recommend someone who might be a great fit for this*"

- Before you go into lots of detail around the company and role, check how much they know about the business first. You can avoid patronizing and potentially annoying candidates this way. If you're talking to a candidate who knows the company and sector well, saying something like "*I'll give you an overview of the company and role – I suspect I'll be telling you things you already know, but this will help to set the scene*" can help to position the conversation without patronizing them.

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Pitching roles to candidates: The core pitch

How do you effectively describe a role opportunity to a candidate over the phone?

The core pitch

- If you're approaching lots of candidates over the phone, it's difficult to make every pitch unique. You want to have a core pitch, that you may vary depending on your audience. The trick is doing this without sounding scripty – you want candidates to feel special.

- A good pitch answers obvious questions that a candidate would want to know the answer to, e.g;

> *What does the company do?*
> *How big is it?*
> *What is the role you're hiring for?*
> *Why do you need this person?*
> *What will they be responsible for?*
> *Where is the role based?*
> *What are the requirements?*

- A really good pitch weaves answers to these questions into a story / narrative that makes the company and role seem as interesting as possible. It uses facts and statistics where possible to illustrate why this is an attractive opportunity.

- Having a strong pitch around the product / proposition is especially important when working with entrepreneurial / early stage companies. You don't need to conceptually explain Nike in great detail; you might need to if you're working for an early-stage business which isn't well known in the market.

- Try to explain things clearly and simply so that even "the normal person on the street" with no relevant industry experience would understand it.

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Pitching roles to candidates: Themes

Depending on the nature of the company and role you are working with, there are different themes you can leverage which can be highly effective in selling to candidates.

Influence

One of the major reasons that candidates want to move jobs is feeling that they have a lack of influence and are under-appreciated. Why does your company really need this hire?

"We have a big and interesting challenge to solve and we need your help to figure it out".

You can use influence as a selling point for many different role and company scenarios.

Scale Pitch

This is best suited to larger companies or those who have evidently grown and been successful. Big sounding numbers – whether that is team sizes, revenues, growth rates, profit levels, amounts raised from investors – all give companies and roles credibility.

Impressive statistics re-assure candidates that this is a solid and successful company that is targeting them.

The Next Big Thing

This is best suited to earlier stage, entrepreneurial technology companies who have a new, disruptive product that they are bringing to market.

Whether this is a consumer oriented, or B2B product, if you can explain the market context, and why this product is better than the status quo, you can make this sort of entrepreneurial, growth-oriented opportunity seem highly attractive.

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Pitching roles to candidates: Avoiding "Scriptiness"

Whilst we want to have an effective core pitch, it's crucial to avoid sounding like you're reading from a script. Here are some tips as to how to avoid sounding scripty when pitching to candidates;

Don't use a script!

By all means refer to rough notes or bullet points, but never write out a pitch word for word.

It's best not to refer to notes at all, as that requires you to really know the material in advance, enabling you to pitch in a natural, non-scripty way.

Make sure you vary the speed and rhythm of your speech. Keeping the same rhythm throughout sounds robotic and scripty, and unnatural.

Like a piece of music, get faster in some places and slower in others.

Whenever you start approaching candidates, it's normal to feel a little nervous. Practice makes perfect, and everyone learns a lot during their first few months and years of approaching candidates. If you can be professional, empathetic, knowledgeable and likeable – you'll leave candidates with a good impression.

The tone of your voice is important too. If you sound bored by the opportunity – why would someone else be interested in it? Make sure you are bringing the "Three E's"

Energy – Enthusiasm - Expertise

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Building relationships with candidates: An overview

Building strong relationships with the candidates in your process can bring some very tangible benefits;

- ❑ It can give your process a competitive advantage over others. A close relationship with your candidate helps you to understand and influence their thinking and manage / pivot your recruitment process accordingly. Candidates buy with both their head and heart, and if you can build a strong relationship with them, they will be more willing to accept an offer from the company you are working for.

- ❑ Candidates can become future clients if you work for an external agency. Similarly, if you impress them in an in-house role, they may want to employ you in the future, or put a good work in for you with your line manager.

- ❑ Think about how you can build relationships with candidates that does beyond them just being a candidate in your projects. Can you build something beyond this somewhat transactional arrangement?

Preparing candidates before interviews

Candidates tend to appreciate it when you provide them with useful tips and information ahead of interview stages.

Share interviewers' profiles	Let them know who they are meeting with and any relevant information about their backgrounds and interview styles.
Explain the types of interviews	Let them know the format of the interview – will it be a technical interview or more of a casual conversation to test the fit at a high level?
Explain what interviewers are looking for	Are there any aspects of their experience which are likely to be relevant to a particular interviewer? What topics should they focus on?
Update candidates with any company news	Are there any developments within the company that it would be useful for the candidate to know?
Allow candidates to ask questions and address concerns	Candidates may have questions and concerns before interviews. Address them as best you can so that they can go into the interview feeling confident and fully prepared.

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Managing expectations and giving feedback

It's important to manage the expectations of your roster of candidates, giving them appropriate feedback and keeping them engaged throughout your process.

❏ Let candidates know how many interview steps there are in your interview process, and how long they will likely take.

❏ After each interview step, give them detailed feedback if you can. When candidates become serious contenders for the role, it's important to give them positive feedback. You want to raise their expectations more, the closer they genuinely get to receiving an offer. Equally, you must remember that you might have to reject that candidate in the future, so don't oversell to them.

❏ Try to find out about any other competitive recruitment processes they are in, how advanced they are, and how they feel about the different roles they are looking at.

❏ If you're rejecting a candidate, try to give them reasons as to why. These could either be due to their experience (other candidates have greater experience in an important area) or due to their interview style. Sometimes candidates talk too much, or don't answer questions directly enough – and these sort of style issues are easily addressed. No recruiter enjoys rejecting candidates, but it's important reputationally to reject candidates in an empathetic and professional way. Never ghost candidates.

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Discovering about competitive processes

To avoid losing out to competing offers, you need to discover about any competitive processes that your candidates might have.

Keep up the momentum

Long processes have a strong negative effect on candidate interest. Having a swift process makes you seem like a fast-moving and dynamic business. You might be playing catch-up against a more advanced competitive opportunity. You don't want to miss out on a strong candidate by being too slow process-wise so it's vital you understand their alternatives.

Gauge interest levels and candidates' preferences

It's perfectly reasonable, particularly later in a process, to ask a candidate which opportunity they prefer (assuming the financial aspects were the same). If a candidate dances around the question, it could be because they don't know enough yet, or you might not be in first place.

Try to judge their behaviour. Are you chasing them all the time or are they very quick and responsive? If you're doing all the chasing, it probably isn't a good sign.

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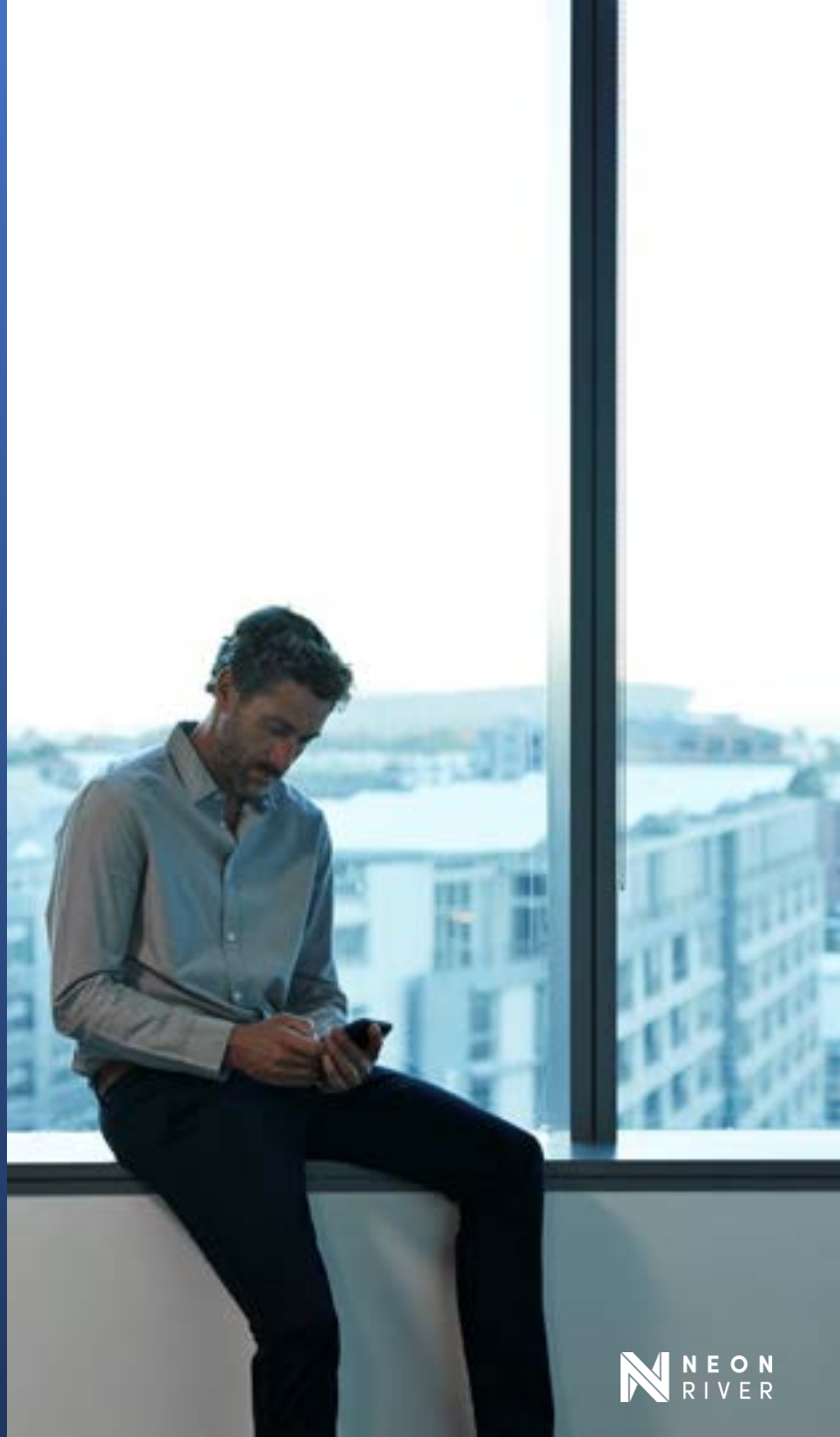
Managing the offer negotiation process

As a recruiter, you often have an important role in helping to negotiate a package with your preferred candidate. Your role is often to;

- Help the line manager understand what level of offer to make the candidate
- Get a sense of the candidate's expectations around compensation
- Manage the expectations of the candidate around your offer effectively

Before you make an offer, it's vital to understand;

- How much your candidate is paid today. Send them a form to fill out, detailing the exact details of their salary, bonus, benefits, LTIP / equity incentives, and notice period. If they have offers from other companies, you need to understand what the details of this offer as this is vital information for constructing the right offer.

- Make sure you have a rough idea of what you can offer, before you ask candidates about their expectations. Otherwise, the risk is they ask for something that (you don't know yet) you can't give and this becomes a problem. You need to know what is possible so you can hopefully influence candidate expectations should you need to. If a candidate asks for something that is impossible, you need to let them know early why that is difficult or impossible and steer them in another direction.

- The emotional impact of a first offer is very important. A low-ball offer will take the shine off any opportunity and can be fatal to candidate interest. Generally, it's best to make a sensible, fair initial offer, whilst remembering to keep something in reserve should the candidate wish to negotiate the offer.

- Make sure you give the candidate the opportunity to get any further information they need beyond the financial offer. Candidates need to feel comfortable about the company, role and financial package before they will be willing to say "yes" to an offer.

- Make sure the candidate understands how any equity incentives might work. They won't value them unless they understand their potential value.

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Paperwork and closing

Once you have verbally agreed an offer, it's important to finalize the paperwork and stay close to the candidate before they start the role.

Make sure that the official paperwork like the employment contract are sent swiftly and without mistakes. Send them to the candidate yourself if you can, so you can ensure there aren't any mistakes before you send it to them.

Sometimes candidates can have second thoughts about joining a company even after signing the contract. By staying close to them through the resignation process and their notice period, you can help to avoid the risk of them accepting a counter-offer or approach by another suitor.

The more a candidate likes you, the harder emotionally it is for them to let you down.

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